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ABSTRACT

In a study of young children's use of conjunction in narrative discourse, different types of discourse were collected from 34 preschool children: visually prompted stories, stories told without visual stimuli, responses to questions about the prompted stories, explanations of a game, and responses in interviews. The discourse was analyzed for the type and frequency of conjunctions used to connect full clauses and sentences. Results indicate that the children used sentential conjunctions, especially sequential temporal conjunctions, far more frequently in narratives than in conversations. This suggests that at least as early as age 4, children have a conception of narrative as a text type having a particular content and function and a particular linguistic form. They also appear to be aware of the crucially temporal nature of narrative, to feel that this temporal ordering should be linguistically encoded, and to know that the most economical and unambiguous way of encoding temporal order is to use temporal conjunctions. (MSE)

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Conjunction in Children's Discourse*

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In this paper the role of conjunction as a textual device in children's discourse, narrative in particular, will be discussed. It will be seen that conjunction type and frequency varies according to text type, in a way that can best be accounted for within a theory of text typology.

Only conjunctions, or sentence connectives, used clausally, i.e. to connect full clauses or sentences, and not those used phrasally, i.e. to connect individual words or phrases, will be considered in this study.

Conjunction is one of the major devices used to establish cohesion in all types of texts (cf. Halliday & Hasan, 1976). One would expect that different types of text, having different functions and structures, would be characterized by the use of different types of conjunctions. As we will see, this proves to be the case, even for young children.

The text type under primary consideration here is the narrative or story. (The terms will be considered to be synonymous.) Before examining the results of the study to be described in this paper, it is important to examine the characteristics of narrative as a text type.

1. Narrative Theory

A narrative can most simply be defined as the description of a series of events, either real or imagined. Labov (1972; 360) defines a "minimal narrative as a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation." Clearly, then, the Labovian minimal narrative would include much discourse that would not normally be considered to be narrative, and we will be concerned with longer, more "orthodox" narratives. The concept of temporal ordering stressed by Labov, however, is generally recognized to be the primary characteristic of narrative.

For example, de Beaugrande (1980; 197), working within a text-processing framework, defines narrative as follows: "In NARRATIVE texts, the control centers in the textual world are in the main event and action concepts which will be arranged in an ordered directionality of linkage." In other words, narratives are about things that happen, and the order in which they happen is important. Here again, then, it is clear that temporal ordering is being stressed.

Another characteristic of narrative in our culture is that it is generally a monadic form of discourse, that is, it generally has the form of a monologue rather than a dialogue. This is the case for adults' narratives, at any rate. Young children, however, tend to require more input from their interlocutor, making the story-telling situation more of a dyadic one. This will be found to have less influence on the use of this linguistic device than might have been expected, though.

Given the fact that temporal ordering of events is the crucial defining characteristic of narrative, one would expect that this would be encoded linguistically, affecting the structure as well as

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the content of this text type. As far as the specific device of conjunction is concerned, narrative should be characterized by the use of temporal connectives like when, then, after, while, etc., and in particular by the use of sequential temporal conjunctions, used to encode the fact that events are being recounted in chronological order. The main sequential temporal connectives are then, and with its asymmetric or temporal function, and the combination and then.

2. The Study

The data to be examined here were collected for a project on children's acquisition of textual devices, headed by Myrna Gopnik; this study is one component of the larger project. In the course of this project, discourse was collected from 34 children aged 2 to 5 years old. All children were enrolled at the McGill Daycare Centre.

Different types of discourse were elicited as follows: for the collection of stories, each child was shown one of three picture books devised for this project and asked to tell a story about the events depicted in the book. The children were also asked to tell a story without the aid of any visual stimuli, i.e. a story about some personal experience, a fairytale, etc. The stories with and without visual stimuli are referred to as prompted and free stories respectively.

The children were also asked a set of questions about the prompted stories, to determine whether they had comprehended the pictures. In addition to the stories and question sessions, they were asked to explain how to play a game, in an attempt to collect explanatory discourse. Their conversations with the interviewer made up the final text type examined.

The length of each child's session with the interviewer and the number of types of discourse elicited varied according to his or her own interest in the tasks involved. Some children, especially the younger ones, hardly talked at all. Others talked freely but did not produce anything that could be considered as a story, even though their comprehension of the picture books was indicated by their good performance on the question sessions. Yet others conversed long and fluently and, in addition, produced a number of stories.

For the purpose of this study, I used a working definition of a narrative as several sentences describing an event or sequence of events, and not interrupted by substantive prompts on the part of the interviewer. (In other words, the interviewer did not have to say anything with more content than "What happened next?" or "And then what did they do?" to get the child to continue his story.) The general criterion was that if the interviewer's contributions were removed, the child's story should still seem coherent and not clearly be half a conversation or a series of answers to questions.

Conversation is defined in a fairly catch-all way here, being deemed to be any discourse which does not fall into one of the other categories (i.e. story, explanation, question and answer session). Failed attempts at stories or explanations were considered as conversation for the purpose of analysis.

After the data were collected and transcribed, two types of analysis were done in order to determine the type and frequency of conjunctions found in each text type. First a gross frequency analysis was done, to determine the frequency per 1000 words of each conjunction used in each text type. Secondly, the percentage of clauses headed by one or more conjunctions was also determined for each text type. The results of these analyses are given below.

2.1 Frequency Analysis

The first type of analysis was used to determine the total frequency of clausal conjunctions as a word class in each of the types of discourse examined. After word counts were done, the frequency of each conjunction was calculated in occurrences per 1000 words; the resulting indices are easily comparable for each discourse type and each age group.

In the total amount of discourse collected from the children, it was found that the two year olds hardly ever use conjunctions (their results will, therefore, not be shown in the tables), and that the three year olds use fewer different conjunctions than the four and five year olds and use them significantly less frequently. The four and five year old children, however, use 15 different conjunctions belonging to all four semantic groups characterized by Halliday & Hasan (1976): additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. And is the most frequently used conjunction, which is in accordance with the results found for adults by Beaman (1984), as well as being intuitively the expected result.

Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency indices for conjunctions in conversation and narratives respectively, first for all children, then for each age group. It can immediately be seen that these differ quite strikingly for the two text types. Connectives as a class are far more frequent in narrative than in conversation, being approximately three times as frequent for the children as a group. The frequency differences between text types are statistically significant at all ages.<1>

No firm conclusions about the relationship between conjunction frequency and children's age can be drawn for these two text types, though. In both cases, the fours show a different rate of usage than the threes and fives, higher for conversation but lower for narrative.

The relative frequencies of different semantic classes of conjunctions will be discussed below.

2.2 Clausal Frequency Analysis

Although an analysis of overall conjunction frequency reveals that narrative and conversation differ markedly in this regard, it might be the case that this is not linked directly to text type. This could be so if it turned out, for instance, that conversation is more "fragmentary" in nature than narrative-- possibly as a result of its dyadic structure-- with a speaker's conversational discourse comprising a greater number of utterances consisting of single lexical items or phrases and fewer complete clauses or sentences. If this were the case, then the profusion of clausal connectives used in narrative would be seen to be simply the result of the greater number of clauses used in narrative, and could not in itself be seen as a linguistic manifestation of the nature and function of any text type. Therefore, it is clearly necessary to determine what percentage of the full clauses in each discourse type is actually headed by a conjunction, rather than only determining the gross frequency of that word class.

A count was carried out of all the clauses in the sample. Since certain types of clauses, e.g. relatives and control clauses, cannot be headed by a conjunction,<2> these were then eliminated from the total count. Thus the number and percentage of conjoinable clauses that were in fact headed by one or more conjunctions was determined.

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of this analysis for conversation and narrative. There is a considerable difference in

Table 1

Conjunction Frequency in Conversation

All	No.	Freq./1000
and (total)	151	17.44
and (symm.)	94	10.86
and (asymm.)	57	6.58
but	90	10.39
because	52	6.01
then	45	5.19
when	23	2.66
so	15	1.73
if	6	.69
after	3	.35
though	1	.12
or	1	.12
while	2	.23
Total	389	44.93
Total words = 8658		

Threes		
and (total)	28	17.36
and (symm.)	13	8.06
and (asymm.)	15	9.29
but	13	8.06
then	10	6.19
because	8	4.96
after	1	.62
so	1	.62
Total	61	37.82
Total words = 1613		

Fours		
and (total)	96	20.71
and (symm.)	62	13.37
and (asymm.)	34	7.33
but	62	13.37
because	31	6.69
then	27	5.82
when	17	3.67
so	8	1.73
if	6	1.29
or	1	.22
while	1	.22
Total	249	53.71
Total words = 4636		

Fives		
and (total)	26	11.98
and (symm.)	18	8.29
and (asymm.)	8	3.69
but	15	6.91
because	12	5.53
then	8	3.69
so	6	2.76
when	6	2.76
after	2	.92
though	1	.46
while	1	.46
Total	77	35.47
Total words = 2171		

Table 2

Conjunctions in Stories

All	No.	Freq./1000
and (total)	269	70.79
and (symm.)	43	11.32
and (asymm.)	226	59.47
then	166	43.68
so	32	8.42
because	15	3.95
but	10	2.63
when	6	1.58
if	2	.53
before	1	.26
except	1	.26
as	1	.26
Total	503	132.37
Total words = 3800		

Threes		
and (total)	14	87.5
and (symm.)	1	6.25
and (asymm.)	13	81.25
then	6	37.5
so	1	6.25
Total	21	131.25
Total words = 160		

Fours		
and (total)	144	62.15
and (symm.)	29	12.52
and (asymm.)	115	49.63
then	83	35.82
so	21	9.06
because	12	5.18
but	9	3.88
when	5	2.16
if	2	.86
before	1	.43
as	1	.43
Total	278	119.98
Total words = 2317		
Fives		
and (total)	111	83.9
and (symm.)	13	9.83
and (asymm.)	98	74.07
then	77	58.2
so	10	7.56
because	3	2.27
but	1	.76
when	1	.76
except	1	.76
Total	204	154.19
Total words = 1323		

Table 3

Conjoined Clauses in Conversation

	No. Clauses	No. Conjoined	% Conjoined
All			
Total	1447	330	22.8
Conjoinable	1308	330	25.2
Twos			
Total	40	1	2.5
Conjoinable	40	1	2.5
Threes			
Total	294	54	18.4
Conjoinable	266	54	20.3
Fours			
Total	807	211	26.2
Conjoinable	729	211	28.9
Fives			
Total	306	64	20.9
Conjoinable	273	64	23.4

Table 4

Conjoined Clauses in Stories

	No. Clauses	No. Conjoined	% Conjoined
All			
Total	693	354	51.1
Conjoinable	614	354	57.7
Threes			
Total	24	15	62.5
Conjoinable	24	15	62.5
Fours			
Total	439	204	46.5
Conjoinable	383	204	53.3
Fives			
Total	230	135	58.7
Conjoinable	207	135	65.2

the frequencies of clauses with conjunctions in the two text types. The percentage of conjoinable clauses that are actually conjoined is approximately 25% for all children in conversation, close to 60% for all children in narrative. The difference between the two text types is significant for all age-groups.(3)

One must bear in mind that, in this analysis, the frequency of clauses headed by one or more conjunctions is determined. This accounts to some extent for the fact that conjunction frequencies for the two text types are rather closer than they appear with the other analysis: a number of clauses, particularly in stories, actually start with a combination of connectives, e.g. and then, so then. Narratives tend to have a very high density of conjunction usage; in many of the shortest stories, in fact, virtually all clauses following the introductory one are headed by a conjunction or conjunction cluster.

The results of this analysis would seem to indicate that the difference in conjunction frequency in the two text types is not related to any putative difference in the frequency of the number of full clauses in the two text types. Rather, it is clearly an independent factor that must be separately motivated.

2.3 Types of Conjunctions

Given that it has been stressed that the prime characteristic of narrative is temporal ordering, it is of great importance to determine whether the type of conjunctions used differs in this text type, as well as the frequency. In particular, do temporal conjunctions occur more frequently in narrative than in conversation? For this reason, the ratio of sequential temporal conjunctions to all other conjunctions was determined for each text type.

In narrative, as was predicted, sequential temporal conjunctions are the most commonly used, making up approximately 80% of the total conjunctions used by the children as a group. In conversation, on the other hand, the sequential temporal class makes up only about 25% of the total conjunctions used by the children as a group. The difference in frequencies is significant at all ages.

In addition, the relative frequencies of the symmetric and asymmetric (or temporal) uses of and were determined. In narrative it was found that asymmetric and predominated, accounting for approximately 85% of all the occurrences of and. In conversation, on the other hand, symmetric and was used more frequently, accounting for approximately 60% of the total occurrences of and. Thus, it can be seen that one specific conjunction, and, which has very low semanticity (cf. van Peer, 1984) and can assume virtually any connective function, is found to mirror the total pattern of conjunction use, being most frequently used as a temporal connective in narrative, but as a non-temporal connective in conversation. This is as one would expect.

3. Discussion

To sum up the results of this study, then, children aged three to five use sentential conjunctions far more frequently in narratives than they use them in conversations. In addition, the children use sequential temporal conjunctions overwhelmingly frequently in narrative, whereas these conjunctions do not occur particularly frequently in conversation.

These results would appear to indicate that at least as early as four years old, and probably as early as three, the children have a

conception of narrative as a text type, having not only a particular content and function but also a particular linguistic form. More specifically, they appear to be aware of the crucially temporal nature of narrative, to feel that this temporal ordering should be linguistically encoded, and to know that the most economical and unambiguous way of encoding temporal order is to use temporal conjunctions, particularly sequential temporals. These, as we have seen, they use very copiously.

It would be possible to tell a story without using any conjunctions, simply enumerating events in chronological order. The Gricean maxim of orderliness (Grice, 1975) would ensure that the unmarked way of interpreting such a narrative would be the correct one; unless there is overt evidence to the contrary, one assumes that the order of narration corresponds to the true order of events. This, however, would appear to be a marked type of narrative; it is more usual to use more overt means of encoding temporal ordering.

Children appear to realize this and to use conjunctions as such a means. Although their stories differ in many ways from adults' stories, being both less coherent and less cohesive, i.e. differing both in content and in linguistic form, they do grasp the essence of narrative-- that it is about events happening in a particular order-- and they do successfully encode this.

It is for this reason, probably, that narrative and conversation differ not only with respect to the type of conjunctions used but also with respect to the frequency of conjunction usage. Conjunctions as a word class are, as we have seen, far more frequent in narrative than in conversation. The children appear to feel that it is important to overtly encode the relationships between events in their stories, and they do this by means of the relevant linguistic device. Temporal links are therefore consistently and unambiguously encoded, and the story is welded into a linguistic whole, by means of the frequent use of temporal conjunctions. The "ordered directionality of linkage" is thus made completely transparent.

To generalize from this, what the children appear to be doing is showing a grasp of the concept of text as an entity not only communicative but also linguistic. They know that specific linguistic devices are appropriate in specific types of text, and to a great extent, they use these devices appropriately.

Notes

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1. The chi-square results for the comparison of conversation and narrative are as follows: 3 year olds, $X^2(1,1773)=28.81$, $p<.001$; 4 year olds, $X^2(1,6953)=96.86$, $p<.001$; 5 year olds, $X^2(1,3494)=156.69$, $p<.001$.

2. Although it is possible to conjoin relative and control clauses with each other (e.g. in (i)), the first such clause of a sequence may not be headed by a conjunction (cf. (ii)):

   i.a The man who lived in that house and who later vanished
   b I want to go swimming and to go to the movies

   ii.a *The man and who lived in that house...
   b *I want and to go swimming...

3. For this analysis, the comparison of conversation and narrative yielded the following results: 3 year olds, $X^2(1,359)=10.43$, $p<.01$; 4 year olds, $X^2(1,1527)=27.65$, $p<.001$; 5 year olds, $X^2(1,679)=34.37$, $p<.001$.

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